Writing in the Elementary School:
An Overview of Programs

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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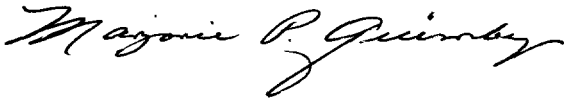

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Writing deserves more attention in the elementary school. Writing should be taught because writing is thinking. Children need to be able to think through a topic and logically write about it. When they research, ask questions, and observe in order to write, students are learning. The higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and judgment are utilized when children write. A good writing program develops a good reader as a by-product, since writers cannot produce a good paper, story, or essay without reading and rereading their own work several times through. Because of the higher order thinking skills involved and the strengthening of reading skills, every elementary school should maintain a strong writing program.

An efficient way to teach writing to children is the process writing approach. The process writing approach teaches students how to compose good papers and also teaches that the process is as important as the product. The process writing approach has five steps: prewriting, initial/rough draft, revising, proofreading, and publishing/sharing. These steps are used in some form by various writing programs. They are used in the areas discussed within this paper, areas such as language arts in the classroom, across the curriculum, and in after school writing clubs.

Writing instruction should be an enjoyable, free flowing, exciting event for children. The workbooks, dittos, and tests should be put away for they impede the process rather than enhance it. Two things that need to be provided are time and

resources. The prewriting step in particular takes a good deal of time and resources that are needed for information and guidelines or modelling. The teacher needs to view herself as a resource or facilitator who is there to help along the writing process.

An obstacle to the process writing approach is teacher attitude and lack of training. Worksheets, workbooks, and tests are easy to grade. Compositions require more time and energy. But the teacher does not need to take a grade on every effort the child puts forth. The teacher can devise a system of grading that works for her and her students.

Donald Graves (1978) states that the message in school has long been "Read and listen; writing and expression can wait " (p.10). He also suggests that skills of penmanship, vocabulary, spelling and usage have been thought necessary to precede writing. A more serious problem he expresses is that schools show little concern for the individual development of learners or important ideas those learners have to share; thus more attention is focused on reading in the elementary school. Research on teacher education programs reveals that preparation for the teaching of writing is often neglected or minimized when compared to preparation to teach reading (Graves, 1978).

Writing During Language Arts Time

Teachers who use the process writing approach believe that writing is a natural thing for a child to do to learn. Children want to express themselves in a meaningful way. When children write, they are sharing what they have discovered. Children

build self-esteem and confidence as they express themselves more and more by writing. Along with exposing their ideas to readers, they develop courage by putting those thoughts and ideas out in the public arena. Children also develop a sense of authority which comes from being an author (Graves, 1978).

These beliefs have led teachers to choose to use the process-conference approach. This approach is centered around the five steps of prewriting, rough draft, revising, proofreading, and publishing and/or sharing. The way the steps are handled depends upon the teacher and the age, grade level, and/or experiences of the children.

The prewriting step takes the most time. Gathering information is the reason it takes a lot of time. However, it is time well spent. Until students have enough information or knowledge of a subject, they may feel they do not have anything important to say. The teacher needs to provide plenty of resources for the students. The teacher may or may not assign a topic for the children to write about. Either way, the teacher needs to provide books or library time for the children. Guest speakers, filmstrips, videos, and field trips are all good background experiences. Most importantly, the teacher needs to read to the students. This helps in all areas of the writing process. Not only does it interest the students and provide information, but it also gives the students a model to follow. Children need to hear the language, rhythm, and fluency of good writing. Listening to stories written by adults can also give the students topics to write about on their own (Hansen, Newkirk, & Graves, 1985).

Once the students have a topic and enough information, they write a rough draft. This step involves getting the information on paper. Since the students need to get their ideas on paper before they forget or get side tracked, they should not worry about spelling and mechanics. For young children spelling can be a big obstacle. How can children write if they cannot spell words correctly? They can use a system called invented spelling. If the students know the alphabet and have a grasp of letter-sound associations, they can spell words the way they say them. Since getting ideas on paper is what is important at this step, invented spelling is ideally suited to this purpose. If they had to depend only on the words they can correctly spell, their compositions would be short and stitled. A kindergarten teacher in York, Maine taught her kindergartners to write by using story pictures and invented spellings (Hansen et al., 1985).

During writing time, young children may find it hard to know what to write. The teacher needs to circulate while children are writing and have conferences with them. A couple of minutes is enough to ask the student questions to get him on track (Graves, 1978).

Conferences are important during the writing process, especially during revision. During this step, the student should have either a group, partner, or teacher to talk with. Whoever the helper is, he needs to read the paper and discuss it with the author. The purpose of revision is to make sure the paper clearly states what the author wants to convey. The person reading the paper needs to tell the author about any unclear ideas or items that need more information. The helpmate needs to

keep in mind that what he says to the author is just a suggestion and that the author may choose to change the parts of the paper if he wishes. The teacher needs to make sure that the experience is non-threatening for the young authors. Children should not be made fun of for errors.

The next stage of the process is proofreading. This stage is difficult for teacher and student. Since the teacher is not using textbooks and worksheets to teach skills, the students are all going to be at different levels developmentally in the skills area.

Jane Hansen (1985) lists three basic principles related to skill development. The first principle is to teach autonomy. Since the goal of an educator should be to turn out independent learners, she should teach children how to find information for themselves. The teacher should structure the class so that the learners know when and to whom to go for help. The second principle is to teach what the children need. While the students are reading and writing, the teacher listens to them trying to solve problems they have. This information is used to teach what the student needs to be able to move ahead. The last principle is to make good use of valuable time. The teacher teaches the skill that seems most crucial at that time to the child. But she does not just teach it to one individual, she makes sure others are there to hear. The teacher can use students to teach skills to other students who need a skill they possess.

Hansen also suggests ways of handling skills teaching in several areas. In the area of context clues, if in reading the child is stuck on a word, the teacher asks him to read ahead to

see if that helps. In spelling, the student should go through his paper and circle any words he thinks are misspelled. Next he should go to a peer who checks the spelling also circling words that he thinks are misspelled. Lastly, the student brings the paper and his list of spelling words to the teacher. The teacher checks his list of words previously misspelled and corrected. Then she indicates lines where there is a misspelled word. If there are more than two, she corrects the rest herself. The student then adds the two words to his list. At this time the teacher looks at the two words and decides if a possible lesson can be made on the spot to help the student learn to spell the word or words correctly. If so she teaches him a strategy or lesson, making sure others are around to benefit from the lesson. The teacher can also have the student phonetically sound out the word to spell it correctly or have him use a dictionary.

In the area of phonics, the teacher looks at the word the child is stuck on and has him find words in a textbook, trade book, or any other source that has words he knows with the same beginning, middle, or ending sound as the part of the word he was stuck on. In teaching punctuation, the teacher has each child make a list entitled "Things I Can Do" to keep in their folders. When the teacher is checking his paper during proofreading, she looks at his list to see if he has made any errors in an area he knows something about. If he has she asks him to check the number next to the skill. The student then looks at the skill she has indicated and sees what error he has made. When teaching a new skill to a student, the teacher should try to find examples from children's literature. For example, to teach about

quotation marks the teacher should find a dialogue in a book to show the student. When the student shows that he can use the skill, he adds it to his list of "Things I Can Do."

With regards to the study skills area, the child should be taught basic library skills. The students should be able to look up things they need to know. They should also be able to use other students as a source of information, since students have different areas of interest and expertise (Hansen et al., 1985).

Hansen's suggestions help the process writing teacher teach skills to her class. During proofreading, the teacher uses previous experiences with her individual students to assess what they are capable of in terms of perfecting their papers. After the teacher points out errors to the child in a conference and the student is happy with his effort, the student makes a final draft using his best penmanship.

The publishing/sharing step can be handled several ways. How the teacher has the children publish or share their papers depends on the purpose for the classroom writing assignment. For example, in one first grade classroom, the teacher had the children write about their summer vacation. Then she typed the stories and made them into a book. The children loved reading the book as well as seeing their own story in book format. Another way of accomplishing this is for the teacher to have the children make their own books to add to the class library. Another way is to have a storytime in which children can read their original stories to the class. This activity is terrific for building pride in their work (Hansen et al., 1985).

The teacher of the process writing approach needs to understand several points in order to use the program to its fullest. It is important that the teacher writes. This is important for modelling and assessment purposes. Educators have long known the importance of modelling. Students often emulate a good teacher thus it is important that the teacher lets the students see her writing and composing several drafts. In terms of assessment, a teacher who understands the writing process knows what to look for in respect to grading the work.

The teacher needs also to remember that conference questions should be directed to the message of the paper first and then second to mechanics and finer points. This again stresses to the student the importance of the ideas he is conveying in his writing (Graves, 1978).

One of the major goals of the writing program is metacognition. The teacher wants the student to think about his own thought processes. Thus the teacher should ask questions about how the student figured something out for themselves. The teacher should ask how the student came up with a strategy that worked for him. Questions should lead the student to think about his own thinking. During the revision step, the teacher should have the student read his work aloud. Deciding if his writing sounds good is a metacognitive process (Hansen et al., 1985).

Since process writing is a child centered approach, the teacher should give responsibility for assessment to the student whenever possible. The teacher could set a number of papers she would like to grade. Then she should let the children decide which ones to turn in for a grade. The teacher who writes knows

what to look for in these papers. She may have a checklist or she may look for improvement between drafts and the final copy. If the students have a writing folder, she can check their lists of skills to see if they have used them correctly. Most importantly, the teacher should make sure that the idea or message of the paper is developed since this is the purpose for having students write--to convey a message.

Writing Across the Content Areas

Composition of papers should not stop because language arts time is over. Since the purpose of writing is to explore and understand a topic, it is perfect for use in the subject matter areas. Traditionally teachers have used content area time as a question and answer period or as time for recall of information taught to them. Children seldom write more than a brief sentence about a topic on a ditto or piece of paper. What teachers need to do is help "students to use writing to reformulate and extend their subject matter knowledge" (Rosaen, 1990, p. 420). Teachers can do this by providing "more and better opportunities to write about subject matter" (Rosaen, 1990, p. 420).

The difficult part of teaching writing in the content areas is that the students need to learn how to change their style of writing to fit the subject matter. Sherry Howie calls these different styles "modes of composition." Howie states that there are four modes found in subject area textbooks: 1) narration and description, 2) procedure, 3) time-order exposition, and 4) topic exposition. She explains that each of these modes has its own

components, structure and requirements of expression. When students learn how to compose in these modes it aids their comprehension of the subject matter because they can figure out what the language intrinsic to that mode and subject matter means. Howie claims that students develop fluency when they practice building cumulative sentences and create sentence parts (Howie, 1984).

Howie has accumulated several activities for every aspect of teaching writing to upper elementary students in the content areas. In order for the learner to understand and use the modes, the teacher should present a handout that lists and explains the modes. (Examples of suggested handouts can be found in Howie's book listed on the reference page.) The next step would be for the teacher to have the students find examples of modes in their textbooks, write out the passages, identify what mode, and then justify their choice. The teacher should explain that different subject areas use different modes. To illustrate this point the teacher could make a list of the modes on the board placing next to each mode the various content areas. The teacher would then ask the students if they agree with the placement of the subject matters next to each mode. Thus the teacher would be checking to see if the students could decide if a particular mode is regularly used in their subject matter books.

The teacher prepares the students to write by handing out probable essay questions. She has the students identify the subject area and the mode that best suits the questions, and then she has them discuss their ideas. Then she prepares and gives them a list of essay questions for them to work on. She has them

identify the best mode, components and structure, and purpose of each question. She explains how knowing the mode to write in helps communicate and answer better. Next the students pick one essay question and list the components and structure for it. (They can refer to the handout for these.) Writing a purpose using the definition of the mode comes next. The teacher provides time for the children to do an initial draft using the components and structures. The teacher should collect these drafts.

Now the teacher should introduce the idea of text factors. Before discussing this though, the students are placed into small groups to analyze textbook examples of modes. The students should be identifying the mode, components and structures, and subject area. The teacher has the groups read their answers aloud when they are finished. The teacher encourages other groups to challenge them so that they have to defend their answers. Now she explains to the students the three text factors of explicit information, reader factors, and implicit or inferential ambiguity. Then she discusses with the students the concept of writing so that information and communication are best given. For further examination, she passes out a handout with a recipe, a mathematical equation, and a poem on it. She has the students identify explicit words and implicit factors in each. The teacher discusses what the readers have to know and what the writer had to consider when writing each. The class discusses what readers these passages appear to be written to: inexperienced ones, very experienced ones, or peers. The teacher shows the students the modes and text factor considerations for

each of these examples. The teacher should next explain that these are the mode and text factors writers have to consider when writing a piece.

To relate factors and modes to the students' writing, the teacher discusses factors in terms of their own writing. Also, the teacher has the students apply reader factors to themselves as readers of textbooks. She asks the students if these factors help them read better.

Next the teacher passes back the students' initial drafts collected earlier. They should now rewrite using what they have discussed about text factors and readers. They should identify on top of their paper who the reader is going to be. When the students have finished rewriting, the teacher collects the papers.

For modelling and analytical purposes, the teacher should project well written compositions on an opaque or some type of overhead, after obtaining the author's permission. The class and the teacher both point out strengths and look for areas that need improvement. Now the teacher returns the students' papers to them. She has them critique their own papers. She has them revise. Before she has the students write a final draft, she conducts a teacher-student conference to assess what each is learning and where they need help.

Lastly, to help the students understand modes and factors, the teacher gives them a handout with questions relating to text and reader factors. She asks the students to fill out the handout using one passage from their textbooks. The class discusses whether the passages they selected were well written or

not. The students are grouped and are asked to analyze two more passages in the same manner. The teacher has the class next discuss the passages their groups chose with respect to the handout questions (Howie, 1984).

The preceding information was only a small section from Sherry Howie's A Guidebook for Teaching Writing in Content Areas. The discussion thus far was about teaching different styles of writing in the upper elementary and junior high grades. Obviously these activities are too advanced for primary students. The following are suggestions for teaching younger elementary students writing in the content areas.

Kathy Matthews (1985) suggests three ways to extend writing in the classroom: 1) develop an accepting environment, 2) ask questions, 3) provide a wide range of writing experiences. Matthews feels that the teacher must learn to accept responses that are by most standards inaccurate. The teacher needs to emphasize the fact that the children are writing and thinking and she should not be concerned whether or not the content of the writing or thinking is accurate or infallible. In an accepting environment, statements lead to discussions in which children gently challenge each other. The children are reading and voicing their own hypotheses. They are stimulated to read and write about phenomena on their own.

For stimulation, the teacher needs to surround the students with open-ended questions. The teacher must go beyond just discussion and place questions in strategic places around the classroom. For example, she places a question about the outdoors next to the window. She places a question about the animal next

to the classroom pet.

Then the teacher provides the students with lots of writing exposure. She starts a class newspaper on chart paper. The teacher gets news from the leader and writes it on the paper. Then the children write their own news on the chart paper. The teacher has journals and booklets in the classroom. These she uses for student writings at their desks. Also, she has writing books whose shape and function are different from the journals. The teacher has individual area books at activity areas. She places community journals at the curricular areas of the room. Finally, the students can have "End-of-the-Day" books in which they write events of the day in them.

Thus for younger children, the teacher's main thrust for writing in the content areas is to get children to open up and get their ideas on paper. The writing in the content areas books as suggested by Matthews serves several purposes. Besides giving children writing experience, they can get a taste of writing observations. Also they can write about problems they are having, confusion, feelings, or even ways of approaching a subject. When the students are writing this way, they are taking leaps towards understanding themselves and others.

Donald Graves (1978) writes that the student "masters the conventions of language in the process of conveying information" (p. 26). He also writes that comprehension in math is aided when children have to write their own problems. These ideas provide a rationale for writing across the curriculum. When children write they are learning how language works. If they write in the subject areas then they unlock the secret of the language used in

the content areas.

As with process writing, writing in the content areas should have its primary focus as idea development and its secondary focus on written form. "Teachers need to pay attention to the extent to which students are comfortable with and skillful at using a particular writing form" (Rosaen, 1990, p.421). Once again teachers need to be well attuned to the developmental stages of the individual students under their care. (Rosaen, 1990)

Writing in After School Programs

Another area in which one finds writing being done in elementary schools is in after school programs. An exemplary program can be found at Frost Elementary School in Chandler, Arizona. They run a publishing company they have named the Polar Press. It is an after school company that meets two hours a week. The Polar Press was a "natural outgrowth" of the school's writing lab.

The writing lab itself was an excellent example of an elementary writing program. It consisted of a comfortable environment in which to write. They used computers to help take the frustration out of revising. The students have an accepting environment in which they can exchange ideas with other people. There are times when authors read their works to a receptive audience. The equipment the students bring are a three ring notebook, paper, sharp pencil, and a data disk. Reading materials are provided for models and story starters.

One activity of the students involved is to listen to exemplary passages from literature. In these the children note the use of comparisons, colorful language, similes and metaphors, and other techniques. The students also get into learning groups for paper and pencil activities, directed writing techniques, and word processing and keyboarding skills. When the students write, they use the process writing steps. After they have a manuscript finished, they are ready for publishing by the Polar Press.

The Polar Press as mentioned earlier came about as an addition to the school's writing lab. The sponsoring teachers obtained a grant from Teacher Venture Arizona, which supplies K-12 with funds from local corporations. With this money the sponsoring teachers bought wallpaper for covers, saddle stapler, art supplies, and a notary seal for literary awards. The teachers then set up departments for revision, editing, illustration, layout, manufacturing, and typing.

The sponsors then went to 4th-6th grade classrooms advertising for workers. They selected students who submitted applications, teacher recommendations, and parent permission slips. The staff was oriented by working through the steps of publishing with their own stories.

The company decided to use the software program "Ready, Set, Go." A difficulty they experienced was with the layout. Finally a teacher decided that making mock-ups of how the book should be sequenced and look would help.

To solicit young authors, parent permission slips and forms for teachers to nominate student stories were handed out to the classrooms. The student council made T-shirts for staffers. The

staffers created posters and made announcements over the PA system.

Now that the company is in business, the procedure is for a staff member to get his department folder and then go to his "office" space, a desk and chairs for clients. The editor-in-chief, a sixth grader, greets new authors and assigns them to a department. The new authors first select book covers. Three copies are actually made of each book. One goes to the author, one goes in the library, and the last goes on sale. Authors usually buy a copy for a relative.

The staff members are there to assist the author. They do not make decisions or force changes on the author. In addition the illustration department may do part, all, or none of the illustrations. It obviously will mean more to the author in the future if he did the whole book himself.

The beauty of the Polar Press Publishing Company is that it creates an increase in self-esteem, leadership qualities, communication skills, and confidence in staff members and authors. The support from others who share the same interest in writing is invaluable. The students who get involved have learned immeasurable skills that they will carry with them throughout life (Cleveland & Orlick, 1990).

Conclusion

As shown, the teacher who is interested in having her students write has several possible routes to take. Writing should be included in any good school program. Writing does not

need to be confined to the allotted language arts period. However, writing should be a major consideration when teaching language skills. Too often teachers assign pages out of a workbook or textbook on various skills giving the students infrequent and poor opportunities to write. It makes more sense to teach quotation marks when a child is creating a dialogue rather than because that's the next subject covered in the teacher's manual. Writing during language arts should be based on the process writing approach which has natural steps that show the child the importance of expressing themselves.

Writing across the curriculum should be done in the classroom. Since thinking takes place when children write, writing about a subject adds to their understanding of a topic. They tap into the language and forms of writing done in the content areas. Comprehension in math is shown to be aided when children learn how to create problems on their own. Observations, which are a big part of elementary science, can be charted and written out by children. The depth of understanding of others in social studies is increased. Overall, increasing writing in the content areas should be a goal for teachers.

With all the attention given to sports, it is encouraging to see students devoting their time and energy to after school writing programs. The program described here, the Polar Press, was such a success that the teachers have helped other schools set up similar programs. Students need constructive things to do with their free time and what could be better than making their own original compositions?

The future of writing in elementary schools looks bright. More information and programs are being put forth for use by the elementary teacher. The resources are there for the devoted teacher. Hopefully, more and more teachers will see their value and use them.

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